

The *Avatar*: realistic science fiction between Mercantilism and Marxism

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Abstract:

The mass popular science fiction movie *Avatar* with its broadcasting in 2009 has reached mass popularity and again has raised questions about the depiction of colonialism, capitalism and destruction in the name of profit. The Na'vi tribe, inhabitants of the Pandora planet, are attacked and colonized by an army from the Earth in search and exploitation of "unobtainium", a rare natural resource. The rhetoric and approach through humiliation and destruction by the Earth army depicted in white soldiers against the "primitive" tribes who have to be "civilized" is a pure copy paste of the mercantile period in human history. This period as a predecessor of capitalism and neoliberal capitalism that we currently live in has used the colonial approach to start accumulating capital as main currency for the stability of the states. The movie clearly depicts the Marxist theory of accumulation of capital and also the theory of mercantilism in the period of British and Spanish colonialism of other newly discovered continents and civilizations. The key characters in the movie that represents mercantilism as an economic system that was established mainly on imperialism and colonial expansion, are depicted by Selfridge and Quaritch. These leaders of the industrial military complex from Earth that ruthlessly occupied Pandora present the ideology of mercantilism based on expansion to other territories and mass exploitation of natural resources. The opposite characters that depict Marxist theory and the fight of the oppressed working class are presented through Na'vi people of Pandora and main characters Neytiri and Jake who turn from the side of the oppressor to the side of the oppressed.

The aim of this paper is to create a parallel between the mercantilism and Marxist theory of the struggle of the working class depicted in the movie *Avatar*. It will compare the Marxist approach to accumulation of capital and class struggle against ruthless colonization of other worlds practiced in the mercantile period from 16 to 20 century. The paper will cover mercantile philosophy and Marxist philosophy through the movie *Avatar* with the aim to prove that mercantilism and colonialism have never disappeared and they have changed their form of existence and exploitation. In order to more clearly present these two philosophies, the approach will be as follows: analyzes of the actions and roles of the two characters, Selfridge and Quaritch as pure representatives of mercantilism. On the "opposite" side will be an analysis of the characters

of Neytiri and Jake together with their roles in the movie. Furthermore, the paper will also cover part of the work of Rabindranath Tagore who in his magnificent work did not miss to write about the life under British rule which was a representative of the both the dying mercantile and rising capitalist system at the end of 19th and beginning of the 20th century.

Keywords: capitalism, mercantilism, Avatar, colonialism, Tagore

Introduction

The popular science fiction movie *Avatar* broadcast in 2009 has immediately reached a high position on the movie list and wider popularity. Although it is not the first to criticize the US foreign policy (one of the first ones was “Full metal jacket”, 1987 by Stanley Kubrick¹), it has definitely steered public discussions. In order to draw a line between the science fiction that covers social conditions philosophically theorized and explained in the work of Karl Marx and Rabindranath Tagore, this paper will attempt to make a triangle of approaches to humans long lasting problem: equal distribution of wealth. The movie, *Avatar* has posed this never solved problem through a science fictional form, indirectly connecting an imaginary planet inhabited with indigenous people not familiar with unequal distribution of wealth and violence based on greed, reflecting the philosophy of Marx and Tagore. Marx’s approach to the unequal distribution of wealth has critically analyzed the capitalist society based on two premises: capitalists’ endless needs for commodities and unequal distribution of wealth. This endless need for commodities directly endangers the environment because its foundations are based on the expansion and extraction of wealth from nature without consideration of the consequences. On the other side, Tagore speaks about different forms of wealth distribution in which rich people are responsible for creation of the quality of life of community members of all layers of the society. The paper will connect the critical science fiction of *Avatar* with Marx’s critique of capitalists and Tagore’s view of equal distribution of wealth in society. An additional importance of this paper is the connecting line of three important examples of work from three different centuries, seeing how they are

¹ Brian Marks, ‘Full metal Jacket- Stanley Kubrick’s Misunderstood Masterpiece,’ <https://tilt.goombastomp.com/film/full-metal-jacket-misunderstood-masterpiece-30/>, [Accessed 18 November 2022]

intertwined and how much they show that the problem of unequal distribution of wealth is relentless.

Mercantilism and Marxism in 21st century *Avatar*

The narrative of the movie is placed in the imagined future year of 2154 on a planet - Pandora, a fictional moon in a distant galaxy. The main inhabitants of this planet are blue skinned indigenous people by the name of Na'vi, who live in harmony with nature and worship the mother goddess Eywa. On the other side of the story, is a powerful and rich corporation, RDA from the Earth which invades Pandora in search of a mineral called unobtainium, and in their ruthless approach towards the natives they present a recognizable copy of the colonizers from the 16th and 17th centuries. Core representatives of the RDA corporation are the characters of Colonel Miles Quaritch and Parker Selfridge. At the beginning, from this group of colonizers private Jake Sully is selected to infiltrate the natives with his avatar that is a full copy of the physical appearance of the Na'vi natives. However, as the time goes by and Quaritch and Parker with their orders clearly explain their true intentions (the extraction of unobtainium at any cost, even the death of the Na'vi), Jake Sully slowly but surely makes up his mind to support the fight of the Na'vi for the preservation of their planet and freedom. On the other side of the coin, we have Jake Sully and Neytiri, the daughter of the chieftain of the Na'vi people, who are organizing the struggle for their homeland. The switch of sides of Sully from a sole private who listens to orders of the RDA corporation, to a courageous leader and member of the Na'vi people, is triggered by the reality that the aim of the RDA corporation is only profit, propelled by greed and bloodshed. Furthermore, the Avatar body is a complete replacement for his body that is half functional (he is a paraplegic) and can completely fulfill its need that cannot be filled by the empty promises of the RDA corporation for new prosthetic limbs.

Here we can freely make the first connection with the philosophy of Karl Marx following the motives of the RDA corporation. As Marx has noted, colonialism is another form of capitalism, capitalists used colonization as a means to achieve primitive accumulation, the “original sin” of capital.² As a fully adequate example for the actions of the RDA corporation, we also have mercantilism as an economic strategy that is a predecessor of capitalism. This economic strategy

² Karl Marx, *Das Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* Volume I (London, UK: Penguin, 1976), p. 873

arose in 16th and 17th centuries and its standpoint was “import less, export more” and a country’s wealth should be measured in its gold and silver, by the philosophical approach of Adam Smith, most popular figure of mercantilism and his work *Wealth of Nations*.³

Therefore Spain, Portugal and later U.K., France and Netherlands were the main colonizers in other continents and these European countries became richer because of colonialism and the mercantilist system of imposed high tariffs of imported goods.⁴ The sole representatives of the mercantilist system are depicted in the form of RDA corporation as the colonizing country and the characters of Quaritch and Parker representing military or Spanish conquistadors. Even in the sci-fi movies in the 21st century we cannot avoid mercantilism and its exploitative nature. Through the eyes of Franz Fanon, French psychiatrist and journalist, Nathan Eckstrand explains the separation of one country by colonialism. Colonialism has one most visible element of oppression: direct military control of the land, resources and people. This world is split in two, one of the colonizers and other of the colonized. The solid line that keeps two worlds separated and without contact, is the military and the only language spoken by the authority is violence. In *Avatar* the depiction of a divided world clearly follows the line of colonialism, the main pillar of mercantilism. The character of Selfridge is the authority who does not have any contact with the colonized people (Na’vi) and Quaritch who is the oppressors’ extended hand, that is, the military.⁵

An additional element of colonialism is its justification by the colonizers with adding how much infrastructure they have built (roads, schools, hospitals) and how much have they contributed into the quality of life of colonized people. This can be seen in the speeches of Selfridge and Quaritch, accentuating the roads they have built for the Na’vi people. The usual narrative for this justification by the colonizers is that people want the provided goods and services, therefore colonizers have a right to exploit the land. One fact that is intentionally ignored by supporters of colonialism is that replacing one society with another (imposing goods and services that are not

³ Adam Hayes, ‘Adam Smith and the Wealth of Nations,’ <https://www.investopedia.com/updates/adam-smith-wealth-of-nations/>, [Accessed 19 November 2022]

⁴ Nachiket Nishant, ‘Theories of International Political Economy: Mercantilism, Liberalism and Marxism,’ <https://medium.com/@worknachiket/theories-of-international-political-economy-mercantilism-liberalism-and-marxism-13f6b0f25e65> [Accessed 19 November 2022]

⁵ Nathan Eckstrand, ‘Avatar and Colonialism’ in *Avatar and Philosophy Learning to See*, ed. by George A. Dunn, (UK: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2014), p. 193.

previously required) creates a new society in which the colonized are dependent on the colonizers which creates an inferiority complex, while colonizers consider themselves a superior race.⁶ This feeling of superiority expressed through insulting and dehumanizing language can be seen in the statements of these two characters when they are naming Na'vi people as “savages” and “blue monkeys”. This dehumanizing labeling of indigenous people is much seen and read in the myriads of papers of Spanish conquistadors and British colonizers with which they were justifying their mass killings during the era of colonies. The absence of indigenous people in the Bible was endlessly used for their extermination from the face of the Earth.

As mentioned above, in the middle of the movie, Jake Sully decides to change sides and join the Na'vi people. A parallel can be drawn here with the labourers and bourgeois. Jake is a labourer, while the bourgeois are his employers, the rich corporation from Earth. Furthermore, Marx explains that capitalists in their never-ending quest for commodities are prepared to go to the end of the galaxy and more.

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.⁷

The movie *Avatar* no matter how much is a product of the director's imagination, is a good example of Marx's theory of the endless need for commodities of the capitalists.

The equal distribution of wealth that is one of the basics of Marxism, is seen within the structure of the Na'vi people. Although they are depicted as indigenous people living in harmony with nature, not familiar with the technological advances of the Earthlings, they do not seem to miss much from the commodity that is imposed by the invaders. As Marx explains: the constant expanding of the market for products, pushes the bourgeois class to the limits of the globe⁸. They have to go everywhere, in order to establish new connections for the capital and profit to flow. But

⁶ Nathan Eckstrand, 'Avatar and Colonialism' in *Avatar and Philosophy Learning to See*, ed. by George A. Dunn, (UK: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2014), p. 194

⁷ Karl Marx, *Das Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* Volume I (London, UK: Penguin, 1976), p. 945.

⁸ Mike Wayne, 'Jameson, Postmodernism and the Hermeneutics of Paranoia,' in *Understanding Film Marxist Perspectives* ed. by Mike Wayne (London: Pluto Press, 2005), p. 114.

this omnipresence requires massive productive forces together with perfect coordination, cooperation and production. To be more precise, it requires socialization of the mode of production. So, the conclusion is that in order to establish this mode of production with mass cooperation, collaboration and coordination, socialism itself has to be established. The Na'vi tribe with its smooth function in which everybody is organized within the needs of the community and based on the endless network of nature from the mother goddess Eywa, indirectly sends a message that they are already in the future, way far from capitalism. This confirms the theory of communism, that socialism is one step after capitalism, suggesting a direction to a classless society with established equal distribution of wealth by the people according to their needs and contributions.⁹

Tagore's view of society and equal distribution of wealth

In the article named "Wealth and Welfare", the prominent Indian author Rabindranath Tagore explains how property and wealth were treated and seen in Indian society "in former days".¹⁰ Public opinion had a strong influence on the wealthy and many public works were voluntarily supported by the rich classes. The philosophy of sharing for the masses to have water supply, medical help and education, was spontaneous adjustment of mutual obligation. Furthermore, the surplus of wealth followed the channel of social responsibility and it was a supporter of civilization. However, the position of Tagore towards property was slightly different from that of Marx. His opinion was that the urge for the rise of property is a fundamental part of human nature. The social training that we receive through life aims to make our property the expression of the best in us.¹¹ Additionally, the rise of the standard of living contributed to the creation of self-centrism where wealth is the ultimate goal of life and strongly contributes to class division. Tagore compares the rise of self-centrism and individualism with pests infecting crops, destroying the quality of the soil and harvest and his opinion that it has to be dealt with as a calamity. This is in

⁹ Mike Wayne, 'Jameson, Postmodernism and the Hermeneutics of Paranoia,' in *Understanding Film Marxist Perspectives* ed. by Mike Wayne (London: Pluto Press, 2005), p. 115.

¹⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, 'Wealth and Welfare,' in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore Vol. III A Miscellany* ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2012), pp. 623 - 625 (p. 623).

¹¹ Rabindranath Tagore, 'Wealth and Welfare,' in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore Vol. III A Miscellany* ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2012), pp. 623 - 625 (p. 624).

line with the Marx's position that workers have to rise against capitalism, which is also seen at the end of *Avatar*, where the Na'vi people rise against the RDA corporation.

Furthermore, Tagore indirectly explains the connection of how mercantilism and its descendant capitalism have destroyed the roots of Indian society. In the essay, 'Philosophy of Fascism', while explaining his impression of Mussolini, Tagore clearly notes that: "in bygone days in India, the State was only a part of the people. The mass of the population had its own self-government in the village community. Dynasties changed but the people always possessed the power to manage all that was vital to them. This saved them from sinking into barbarism. This has given our country a continuity through centuries of political vicissitudes. Our Western rulers have destroyed this fundamental structure of our civilization, the civilization based upon the obligations of intimate human relationship. And therefore, nothing today has been left for the people through which they can express their collective mind, their creative will, or realize the dignity of their soul, except the political instrument, the foreign model which is always present before their envious gaze."¹² Tagore's memory of how Western colonizers have destroyed the fundamentals of Indian society has a direct connection to the destruction of the Na'vi society and land by the RDC corporation, imposing their own standards and values and justifying their actions with a deceiving statement that it was all for the good of the Na'vi people.

Conclusion

Although historically mercantilism as an economic strategy ended at the beginning of the 20th century, it is not dead and it is very much alive within the foundations of the capitalist system. Occupation, colonizing, mass killing, divided societies, humiliation and extraction of the natural wealth of occupied territories, are all seen nowadays and in the movie, *Avatar*. As purely Western economic models, both mercantilism and capitalism are vividly dissected in Tagore's writing as having destroyed the pillars of Indian society and humanity itself. The struggle of the Na'vi people to preserve their planet is the struggle of all people around the world in the last five centuries that were colonized by Western civilization. Based on the inhumane securing of commodities, stockpiling gold, mineral resources and without equal distribution of wealth, the West and its

¹² Rabindranath Tagore, 'Philosophy of Fascism', in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore Vol. III A Miscellany* ed. by Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2012), pp. 771 – 776 (pp. 774-775).

economic models have jeopardised the planet and humankind. However, the voices of the majority who have experienced the whip of capitalism and occupation for illegal extraction of mineral resources and wealth, is rising. Although the movie *Avatar* is fictional, its narrative indirectly depicts the condition of humankind today. The 1% of the population that are feeding on the wealth of the rest 99% or the 10% of the Western world which is building its wealth, influence and manipulation on the back of the 90% who are manipulatively named as Second and Third world countries. In reality the Western world implies that the citizens of these countries are second- and third-class citizens without a right to create their own destiny. The triangular narrative of the movie *Avatar*, together with the philosophies of Tagore and Marx, draw a bloody line through the centuries in which the authors worked, clearly showing that the problems of unequal distribution of wealth followed with the greedy accumulation of commodities, are problems that are deeply rooted in the foundations of the human nature. Mercantilism and capitalism as systems will continue to function as long as humankind is ready to tolerate this dehumanization and killing by its own kind. Maybe, as the movie *Avatar* suggests, it is much easier to kill somebody who does not look like you, reflected in a mirror, like somebody from another planet. But when this “copy” of yours is endangering your life and its existence, the obligation to rise and fight is necessary. Additionally, we have to read and follow the works of philosophers and authors like Tagore and Marx who were very much aware of the threat to humanity posed by capitalist greed and warned us about the danger in their writing. We need to learn not to repeat the mistakes from the past, and be ready to build a different, safe and prosperous future and not in sci fi movies.

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